Christo Engelbrecht (2019). 'Drought: not just the relative absence of rain.'

*Book review of*

**Rebecca Jones. (2017). *Slow Catastrophe. Living with Drought in Australia*.**

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This highly readable and comprehensively researched book is, according to Dr Jones, an '…environmental and social "history from below". It endeavours (and does so admirably) to reveal the *thoughts*, *actions* and *agency* of "ordinary" people' in the ways they '…coped with drought, *not* as isolated events but as life-long trials'.[1] In a sense, this reflects elements of the *longue durée* narrative in drought history, in this instance, covering some 150 years.

This publication is not only an important contribution to Australian drought historiography but also a timeous inspiration for much-needed drought history research in South African Environmental History in general, and for Environmental Microhistory in particular. Cape Town's 'Day Zero' of April/May 2018 is a stark reminder that drought is not restricted to spacio-temporal climate definitions.

This in-depth analysis of seven farms in south east Australia gives the reader insight into a 'lived experience' account on the farms of the Hunters and Brewers (pastoralists), Margaret McCann (dairy and sheep farmer), William Pearse (wheat farmer), Charles Coote (wheat and sheep farmer), Charlie Grossmann (mixed farmer), the Falkiners (merino stud farmer), and Lindsay and Margaret Bettison (mixed farmers). The seven chapters of Section 1 (Drought Stories) deal on a chapter by chapter basis with each of these families. This is useful methodology since it allows the reader to understand similarities and differences in (and between) these drought stories.

For Jones, drought is more than periods of no, sparse or little rain in comparison to what is expected. Drought is a contested scarce climatic *resource*, that impacts on all aspects of man-made and non-man-made life-forms. *Experiences* of drought are varied, its *impact* uneven, as are human and non-human

[1] R Jones. *Slow catastrophe. Living with drought in Australia*, p xii. (Emphasis added.)

*responses.* The four chapters in Section 2 (Living with Drought) investigates: the difficulties surrounding the word 'drought', practices of wild harvesting and self-sufficiency, moving people and animals (hopefully to places of more water), the 'feeling' of drought, and lastly, resilience ('…not an inherent trait, but a skill which can be learned…'[2]) to drought.

The different themes that emerged from stories of drought are divided into intellectual, practical, physical and emotional responses. Whilst practical, they reveal an analytical complexity on different levels because the varied responses to drought range from moving away during periods of drought (either temporarily or permanently), the gamble of destocking, selling farms and or equipment, practicing wild harvesting of plants and animals, moving fodder, seeking off-farm work, enlarging existing farms, or acquiring additional grazing land (to name only a few). These make drought '…*not only a natural but also a cultural disaster* because its effect is as much anthropogenic as it is climatic'.[3] (Emphasis added.)

Jones' historical resources took her '…in unexpected directions.'[4] She identified two 'competing narratives which either *dismiss drought* as an aberration or *accept drought* as an integral part of the climate [that] have characterized responses to drought in Australia…'[5] This research led to exploring resilience in coping with drought, to individual, community, institutional, national and environmental [levels]…'.[6] Jones continues: '…I have tried to peer into unexamined notions of toughness and beneath the wreckage of disaster and degradation to discover ways in which people responded to drought and survived by adapting to this challenge'.[7] This is no mean feat, since Carr remined his readers already in the early 1960s that '[n]o document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought – what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen or perhaps only what he himself thought he think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought.'[8]

A major characteristic (and achievement) of this book – which makes it an excellent read for Environmental Humanities – is the manner in which the *causes* of drought – apart from climatological and the negative *effects* of environmental degradation, are not pinned to the so-popular beating old capitalism over the head as the dominant or prime reason for resource and species depletion.

In the current Anthropocene epoch, the narrative goes as follows: some 10 000 years ago, planet Earth entered a new geological age with decisive effects on the survival of all life. The last ice age ended and the new epoch of global warming, the Holocene, began. But from around 2002 the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen argued that the Holocene epoch is now gone, instead, we nowadays live in the age of the Anthropocene – based on the view that the biophysical changes we now encounter, proves

[2] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xii.
[3] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xix.
[4] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xiv.
[5] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xxiv.
[6] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xxiii.
[7] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xxii.
[8] EH Carr. 1974. *What is History?*, p 16.

such. In the Anthropocene, large-scale land-use changes, (e.g. forests changed into farmlands); carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are about 50 per cent higher than in the Holocene; humans are changing the climate; and collectively and consequently, all life-forms face an environmental crisis. The *Age of Man*, the Anthropocene, has arrived[9] and *Slow Catastrophe* reflects much of this narrative. But, against this framework, *critics of the Anthropocene*, currently argue that we really live in the *Capitalocene*.

Amongst many, Prof Jason W Moore[10] is a leading figure in the Capitalocene debate. This is relevant for this review. There are elements of Moore's concept of double internality of humans-in-nature/nature-in-humans of capitalism as world-ecology, that need mentioning. For instance, humans, on their farms, are co-producing capital-intensive centres of *production*. When the term 'drought' was '…sometimes used as a euphemism for "take care of yourself and don't rely on assistance", [is] an extension of economic realist ideology'[11], then these diaries at Jones' disposal, are valuable for a number of reasons: they reflect responses and adaption to drought; are practical aids to memory; are records for the individual and entire household; serve as a way of writing themselves into existence; serve as statement of transition; diaries as confidants; physical forms of recording, e.g. cloth or card bound notebooks, account books, or pre-printed diaries. They are not perfect mirrors but glimpses rather than complete views inherently incomplete, particular, and idiosyncratic by nature with many gaps and silences. As life-stories they illustrate resilience to drought that reflects particular ways people live their lives, both in and out of these conditions. Therefore, people's '[r]esponse, and ultimately adaptation, to drought was influenced by the way people *understood* drought—as an unusual deviation from the norm or as a recurrent and inherent part of the climate' and *not* as a 'freak event', or a "tiresome quirk".[12]

But farming is more than a financial enterprise nor a rational process. Instead, it is 'a holistic relationship between people and their environment'.[13] Jones carefully analysed how responses to drought are physical and emotional, making them inseparable. Two examples will suffice:

> One of the biggest impacts of the drought for Pearse was the death of nine horses […] Horses were the powerhouse of the farm, without which the farmer had no means of sowing, reaping, travelling, and carting water. Pearse put his hungry horses to graze on what remained of the crop, sacrificing his wheat for his horsepower, but one horse died stuck in a dam (the fate of many animals in drought) and another five died from "sanding"—a slow and painful death due to bowl obstruction from consuming sand on sparse pastures.[14]

[9] G Vince. 2014. *Adventures in the Anthropocene. A journey to the heart of the planet we made*, pp 1–16.
[10] JW Moore (ed.) 2016. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the crisis of capitalism*.
[11] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xxii.
[12] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, pp 165, 166, 168–195.
[13] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p 278.
[14] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p 57.

Human emotions propel or hinder thought and actions which in turn stimulate further emotional responses. To separate them would be artificial. For example, Jones explored the complex nature and responses to drought through sensual expressions of nostrils, skin, eyes and tongue. She wrote: 'At night you could taste the dust in the bed and in your mouth [like] trying to sleep with mud in your mouth'.[15] Emotional responses to drought included: 'confusion and search for certainty', 'who can we blame?', 'experiencing chaos and the need for creating order', 'sharing experiences of drought', finding 'solidarity' or 'escape'[16], were discussed in detail.

According to Jones, '[t]his history […] has been conceived and written with an eye on the present and future as well as the past' and a through read of *Slow Catastrophe* will reveal that a better understanding of "the long now"[17] against '[t]he environmental reality of the Anthropocene, demands…' that people '…acknowledge human contributions to drought and climate change…' as '...participants in their own catastrophe…'[18] It is interesting to note that Jones wrote that although Aboriginal people of Australia were historically more connected with dry-wet fluctuations than for example farmers and grazers and that culturally they had for thousands of years overcame recurring drought and although they '…*were* involved in pastoralism'[19] (emphasis in original), they were '…rarely visible to the historian', in fact, '…their cultural knowledge of drought remained largely unheard in European agriculture…'[20]

In answering the question about resilience to drought, Jones' views are that '…acknowledging the role of sentiment in managing […] land is not anachronistic romanticism…' and the '…idea that we are masters of the land remains essentially preposterous.'[21]

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[15] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p 281. Jason W Moore (2015) discussed this at length in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life. Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*.
[16] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, pp 289–318.
[17] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, pp 320, 321.
[18] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, pp 319, 318, 317.
[19] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xvi.
[20] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, p xvii.
[21] Jones, *Slow catastrophe*, pp 330, 329.